



Can Leaders' Grit and Passion Spread Organizational Toxicity?

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Abstract

The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index[®] survey is a research study tracking annual data on the condition of the American workforce from 2021 to 2024. The survey results provide information about the challenges American workers face and offer overt and covert insights into the state of leadership in organizations in the U.S. Over the past decades, the concept of leadership has garnered significant attention, leading to a flourishing body of literature on terms such as “leader” and “leadership.” Various theories have been developed to address leadership challenges, and concepts like “grit” have been extensively explored in leadership studies. Today, leadership is critically important as the American economy and workforce strive to return to normalcy. In light of these developments, this white paper aims to:

- a) examine leaders’ passion (harmonious and obsessive) as a component of grit, b) examine theoretical implications of passion through the lens of the Virtue Ethics and Path-Goal theories, and c) develop guidelines for cultivating harmonious passion in leadership roles.

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Introduction

Economic and social turmoil has become a prevalent problem in the United States. The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index[®] (2024) highlighted that many American workers feel disillusioned, lacking recognition (30%) and empowerment (27%) from their leaders. In fact, the survey shows that a staggering 73% of workers are willing to quit their jobs, with 44% willing if offered severance and 29% even without having another job lined up. Concurrently, 65% of organizational leaders have expressed concerns about their companies' turnover rates (University of Phoenix, 2024). Therefore, identifying effective leaders and leadership practices in our country is well-justified, given the critical role of our leaders in shaping the success and well-being of our country's workforce.

A concept that has gained traction in the leadership realm is grit. A search conducted on Google Scholar using terms such as grit and leadership rendered a whopping 85,800 publications. Southwick et al. (2019) defined grit as an individual's persistence in pursuing goals. Grit combines sustained motivation, resilience in the face of setbacks, and an unwavering focus on long-term goals (Jachimowicz et al., 2018). While grit seems to have captured the attention of practitioners, leaders, and researchers, critics are skeptical about the invincibility aspect portrayed by leaders who possess grit. Sudbrink (2016) highlighted the paradoxical aspect of grit in the following assertion, "In today's workplace, it is true, we still need tough characters, but with Generosity, Respect, Integrity, and Truth" (p.57).

Sudbrink's paradox stems from the notion that the passion inherent in grit may be problematic. For example, Gillet et al. (2023) used famous, prominent, passionate individuals from our times (Steve Jobs and Tiger Woods) to highlight the physical and psychological

damage they suffered due to their passion. The paradox is supported by the dual role of passion: harmonious and obsessive (Gillet et al., 2023; Vallerand et al., 2023).

Literature Review

Passion: Harmonious vs. Obsessive

Vallerand et al. (2023) defined harmonious passion as balancing what we love doing with other life activities, thereby avoiding conflicts between work, family, and personal life. On the darker side, obsessive passion, often driven by extrinsic motivations such as recognition and acceptance (Lajom et al., 2018), can lead individuals to adopt a “whatever it takes” approach in leadership. Consequently, harmonious and obsessive passion may result in distinctly different organizational outcomes (Lobato et al., 2023).

Passion reflects a leader’s identity and self-expression (Ho & Astakhova, 2020). Those with harmonious passion work autonomously and embrace and internalize their roles, leading to positive emotions, a sense of vitality, and greater work engagement (Ho & Astakhova, 2020). Conversely, when individuals become overly fixated on an activity, they may experience stress, which can negatively impact the quality of their interpersonal relationships (Philippe et al., 2010).

Informing Passion on Leadership Theories

Leadership theories act as a compass, guiding organizational leaders through complex challenges and explaining effective leadership. The Virtue Ethics and Path-Goal theories stand out for their unique focus and applications. The principles of these theories should help leaders channel their grit by deepening their understanding of passion.

Virtue Ethics Theory

The Virtue Ethics theory is a philosophy dating back to Aristotle and Plato. It was developed to promote virtue ethics as a primary approach to moral questions and decisions (Newstead, 2022). Wood (2019) asserted that Virtue Ethics focuses on an individual's character or moral fiber rather than the rules (deontology) or consequences (consequentialism) emphasized by other ethical theories. According to Snow (2016), virtues enable individuals to act according to reason and achieve a balanced and fulfilling life. Virtue ethics informs leadership practice by emphasizing virtuous leadership and nurturing leaders' moral character through self-cultivation of virtues (Wang & Hackett, 2022).

Path-Goal Theory

According to Erzen and Armağan (2015), the Path-Goal theory relates to how leaders motivate their followers to achieve specific goals. The Path-Goal theory underscores a leader's attitudes, skills, and traits in specific situations to influence employees' performance (Suriyanti, 2020). The theory proposes that leaders lead individuals to attain goals and demonstrate the following behaviors: Instructive/supportive, oriented to success, and participative (Erzen & Armağan, 2015). The latter implies that depending upon each situation and the characteristics of the subordinates, the leader may adopt different styles (Bans-Akutey, 2021). According to Bans-Akutey (2021), an essential aspect of the Path-Goal theory is that the leader must consider the subordinates' characteristics to inform the leadership approach.

Theoretical Implications for a Leader's Passion

Leaders must be mindful of the impact of their passionate grit on employees and the organization. While passionate leadership can be beneficial, it can also become destructive if not managed properly (Astakhova & Ho, 2023). Leading an organization driven by sheer passion stemming from grit without strong theoretical foundations, such as Virtue Ethics and the Path-

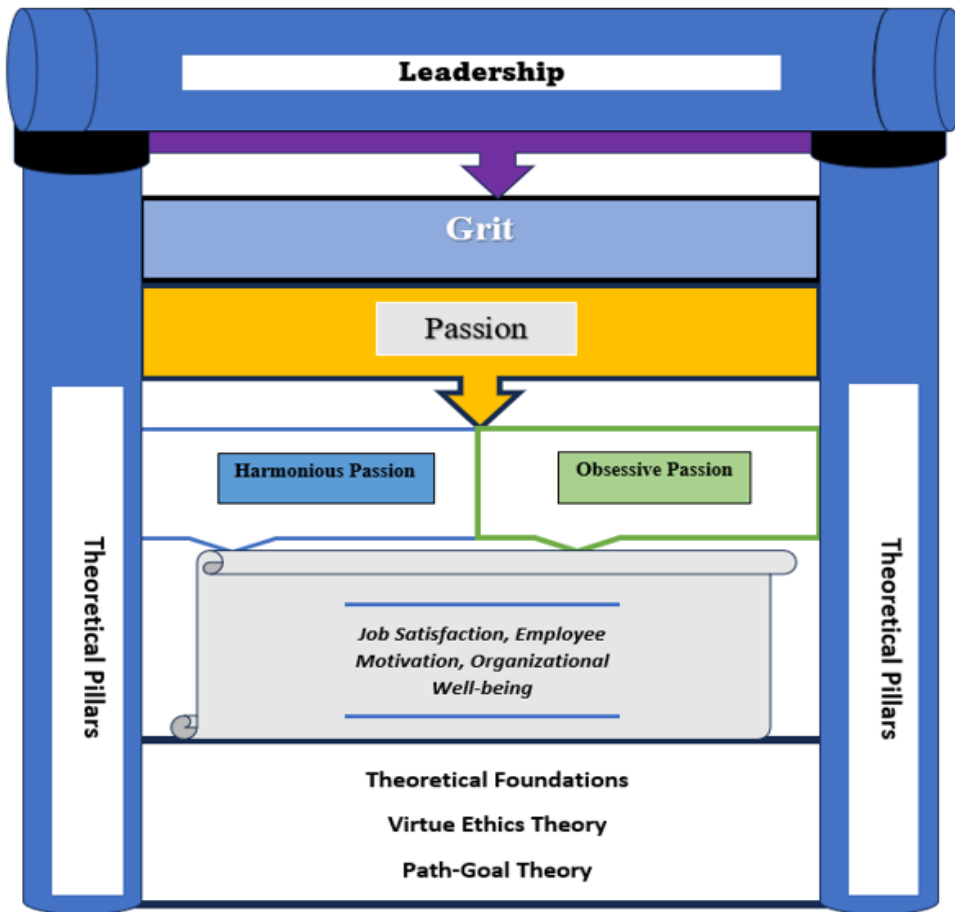
Goal theory, can lead to overwork and burnout, as the drive for success overshadows personal well-being.

Leaders exhibiting obsessive passion and disregarding the principles of Virtue Ethics may prioritize their goals over ethical considerations, resulting in decisions that harm others and violate ethical standards, including abusive supervision (Astakhova & Ho, 2023). In such cases, leaders may justify unethical actions to achieve their objectives. The latter can set the tone for a culture where unethical conduct is the norm. This abusive behavior can negatively affect employees, leading to workplace deviant actions, diminishing employees' sense of self, poor performance, and high turnover (Hendy et al., 2018; Vogel & Mitchell, 2017; Zhang et al., 2023). Furthermore, leaders' virtues, such as empathy and compassion, may not be present in gritty, passionate, obsessive leaders, thus negatively impacting employee morale and well-being (Astakhova & Ho, 2023).

Similarly, the tenets of the Path-Goal theory may be obscured by obsessive, passionate leaders. For example, obsessive passion may blind leaders as they ignore individuals' needs and preferences. By failing to address employees' characteristics, these leaders may thwart motivation, inhibit organizational growth, and cause frustration and disengagement (Olowoselu et al., 2019). Figure 1 illustrates the interaction between theories, grit, passion (obsessive and harmonious), and leadership.

Figure 1

Leadership, Grit, and Passion: Theoretical Implications



Note: Figure 1 illustrates how a robust theoretical foundation can inform a leader's passion resulting from grit, thus avoiding the adverse effects that obsessive passion may create in the organization.

Fostering Harmonious Leadership Passion: Recommendations

Lanaj et al. (2023) asserted the significance and necessity of self-reflection for leaders. This practice can aid leaders in self-regulation and inspire them to cultivate a professional, positive identity (Lanaj et al., 2023). Similarly, Monzani and Van Dick (2020) contended that self-awareness and introspection allow leaders to utilize their talents and character strengths effectively. A second recommendation is for leaders to embrace and apply positive and virtuous leadership in daily practices. According to Cameron (2021), virtuousness in leaders leads to positive relationships and the latter to positive outcomes. Leaders guided by virtue do not possess self-aggrandizing egos; they exhibit a positive energy that leads to superior outcomes

(Cameron, 2021). Providing professional development about leadership theories, such as the ones examined in this paper, may also assist current and future leaders. Professional development in ethical leadership, for example, may help foster a culture of integrity within the organization. Self-awareness (Hartung, 2020) and emotional intelligence training are essential for quality leadership (Frias et al., 2021).

Conclusion

The significant economic and social challenges faced by the United States are compounded by widespread worker disillusionment and alarming turnover rates. The University of Phoenix 2024 *Career Optimism Index*[®] findings underscore the urgent need for effective leadership to address these issues. Strengthening leadership can not only enhance employee satisfaction and retention but also contribute to the overall stability and prosperity of the nation's labor force.

A crucial component of effective leadership is grit, which involves consistently working toward long-term objectives with sustained determination fueled by passion (Caza & Posner, 2019). In leadership, grit's passion is essential for both organizational and personal success. Leadership theories such as Virtue Ethics and Path-Goal, among others not covered in this paper, may offer valuable insights for leaders about harnessing passion effectively and avoiding the pitfalls of obsessive passion. Therefore, understanding and cultivating harmonious passion in leadership is vital for fostering a healthy and productive work environment. By focusing on this aspect of grit, leaders can better navigate the current economic and social challenges, ultimately enhancing employee satisfaction and organizational success.

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